

recommended video: [The Essence Objects Exercise--Video Walkthrough](#)

I believe this is the only brainstorming exercise you'll need to write your personal statement. In order for it to work, though, you'll need at least 10-15 minutes, and a quiet place. The exercise will require your full attention. You can use a computer or laptop, though I've discovered that students tend to have better results when they write this assignment by hand. Who knows why. Something about the texture of the pen on the paper.

Ready? Here we go.

I want you to imagine a box.

In this box is a set of objects.

Imagine that each one is one of your essence objects.

What do I mean?

Each object represents one of your fundamental qualities.

Thus, each object is more than just an object.

For example, in my essence object box I would place a green pen.

Why a green pen? I always carry a green pen because I grade all my students' essays in green. Why green? Because when a student gets an essay back and it's covered in red marks it can tend to look bloody, like a battle field. But if a student gets an essay back that's covered in green it looks verdant. Also, red means "stop" (like a stoplight), but green says "keep going." And that's the essence I want to communicate to my students: keep going. The green pen in my essence object box is more than a green pen.

I would also place in my essence box a well-worn North Carolina Tarheel blue and white basketball. Why? I came home from the hospital wearing Carolina Blue, so I've been a Carolina fan, almost literally, since birth. I've spent more time on a basketball court than virtually anywhere else (which is why the ball is well-worn), and basketball also represents my connection with my dad: when I was a kid we'd watch Carolina games together and play basketball in the backyard for hours. This basketball is more than a basketball.

I would also have the blue Bible with my name etched on it in gold lettering that my grandma gave me when I was seven. (See how specific I'm getting?) For me, this particular Bible represents my having been raised in the Presbyterian Church. And my parents were missionaries, so you could imagine a lot of who I am today has been shaped by the Sunday morning services we attended at Weaverville Presbyterian Church, to which I would always carry my blue Bible. This Bible is more than a Bible.

You get the idea.

I want you to make a list of 20 objects. (Don't complain—you are infinitely complex and creative and could come up with a thousand—I'm asking for just 20.)

Important: Don't write what the objects mean to you as I have just done. I just want you to write the objects.

So my list would begin like this:

Green Precise v5 extra fine rolling ball pen
worn-down, rubber North Carolina basketball
blue Bible with my name stitched on it in gold lettering
bbq sauce
annotated copy of The Brothers Karamazov
friendship bracelet
black and white composition notebook
Amelie DVD
Evanston Hockey t-shirt

You get the idea.

Just write the objects with a couple details that describe each, no commentary needed yet.

If it helps, put on some music. Let your mind wander.

QUESTIONS TO HELP WITH THE OBJECTS EXERCISE

What's something you never leave home without?
What's a snack you crave?
A food that reminds you of your family?
A food that reminds you of home?
A tradition that reminds you of home?
What else reminds you of home?
An object that represents your best friend?
An object that represents your father? Your mother?
Your grandparents, or lack thereof?
Something you loved and lost?
A toy you used to play with as a kid?
Something that makes you laugh?
A book you love? Best movie ever?
Favorite guilty pleasure movie?
An object that represents something abstract that you broke (a heart, a promise)?
An object that represents a regret?
A favorite gift you received?
A favorite gift you gave?
An object that represents a secret? (Don't worry, this stays between us.)
Something about you no one else knows?
A dream?
Something you stole?
Something you found?
Something that makes you feel safe?

QUESTIONS TO HELP WITH THE OBJECTS EXERCISE, CONTINUED

The worst thing that ever happened to you?
The best thing?
The logo on your imaginary business card?
The image you'd like carved into your tombstone?
An object that represents: a smell you love, a smell you hate, a taste you love, a taste you hate, the sweetest sound in the world?
The coolest thing about science?
Something you forgot?
Something old? Something new? Something borrowed? Something blue?
An accident?
Best thing you ever found in the street?
Best money you ever spent?
Your life lie?
Your favorite object?
Something from another country?
Your favorite sentence?
You'd cry if you lost this?
An object that represents someone you'd like to know more about? Something you'll never get rid of?
A bad habit?
A perfect moment?
A time you laughed so hard you cried? A time you cried so hard you laughed?
An image you'll never forget?
What they'd put in the museum of your life?
A tattoo?
The cover image on your first self-titled album?
Three objects from your room?
A near-death experience?
A moment when you were so embarrassed you wanted to disappear?
Recurring dream? Worst (actual) nightmare?
When were you most afraid?
If you had a clone, what would you have the clone do?
First love?
A time you were speechless?
Heaven?
Hell?
The moment you left childhood behind?
A quotation you love?
Your favorite photo?

ONCE YOU'VE WRITTEN YOUR LIST OF ESSENCE OBJECTS

Survey your list. Which essences are missing? Is every aspect of you there? Think more abstractly. Think of qualities not yet represented on the list. How could you phrase those qualities in terms of objects? For example, if you keep lists, perhaps a post-it note? Are you easily angered (lighter fluid)? Good at lots of things (a Swiss Army Knife)? Or sharp (an Exacto knife)?

Write down three more objects.

THE PURPOSE OF THE OBJECTS EXERCISE

T.S. Eliot once said: “The only way to express emotion in art is through an objective correlative.”

What’s an objective correlative? It’s an object to which you correlate emotions, memories, and complex meanings. It’s an object that’s more than an object.

Every object in your essence object box is an objective correlative for some important, complex part of you.

Now survey your list. Does it feel pretty familiar? It should.

Your college essay should feel that familiar.

Just to clarify, I’m not saying all of the objects on your list will end up in your final draft, but some of them might. And chances are good that you will write about the essences those objects represent.

The point is this: if you’ve taken the objects exercise seriously and have described a unique set of objects, you should have the material for a compelling personal statement. In fact, you should have the material for dozens of personal essays, but right now we’re just writing one.

The question of course is which one? Which essences or objects should you choose?

That’s the next step.

